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## AROUND THE ARCHDIOCESE

THE CATHOLIC NORTHWEST PROGRESS  
NOVEMBER 15, 2007

### SU speakers address Catholic identity "crisis"

BY KEVIN BIRNBAUM

"A crisis is looming within American Catholic higher education."

That was the warning delivered by Melanie Morey, Ed.D. and Jesuit Father John Piderit in a presentation on Thursday, Nov. 8 at 7 p.m. in Seattle University's Pigott Auditorium.

According to the two researchers' recently published book, "Catholic Higher Education: A Culture in Crisis," Catholic colleges "are faced with a structural reality that threatens their ability to continue as institutions with vibrant religious cultures."

The Catholic identity crisis is already here, according to Seattle University administrators. "I don't think there is a strong campus-wide Catholic culture at Seattle University," said professor of philosophy and director of the Catholic Studies program in the university's College of Arts and Sciences, Dr. Robert Deltete.

Deltete added that he would like to see the Catholic culture on the Jesuit college campus extend beyond the boundaries of the Chapel of St. Ignatius and campus ministry.

As a means to that end, Deltete invited Morey, who is Senior Director for Research at NarrowGate Consulting, and Father Piderit, who is President of the Catholic Education Institute, to give a lecture entitled "The Catholic Contribution to American Higher Education."

Morey and Father Piderit, whose book is based on interviews with 124 senior administrators from thirty-three Catholic colleges and universities, shared some of the findings of their research as well as several suggestions for promoting the integration of the Catholic faith and academia at Catholic colleges and universities.

#### Maintaining Catholic identity

Working towards that integration is crucial to the future of Catholic higher education in America, the speakers said.

"The issue is not about whether Seattle University is going to be around in twenty years – I have every confidence in the world that Seattle University will be around," Father Piderit said. "The issue is, is it going to be Catholic in twenty years or forty years?"

Jesuit Father Patrick Howell, Seattle University's vice president for Mission and Ministry and chair of the university's Catholic Character task force, said that Thursday's lecture was one component of a larger effort on the part of the university to strengthen its Catholic culture.

"This is part of a continuing conversation that we need to have around the Catholic character of Seattle University, and we're very committed to that," Father Howell said. "The Jesuit commitment is to the faith that does justice. I think we're really good on the justice part; what we need to do is much more exploration about faith and its grounding, especially in the Catholic tradition."

Morey and Father Piderit said that the decreased presence of men and women religious on campuses presents a major challenge for Catholic colleges and universities in terms of maintaining their Catholic identities.

"One of the biggest challenges is finding Catholics and non-Catholics who are willing to take over the roles which Catholic sisters, brothers and nuns [once filled]," Father Piderit said. "Related to this is finding ways to provide students with deeper ways for them to understand how their Catholic faith relates to literature, science, psychology, political sciences, sociology, business, health sciences, and many other disciplines."

Father Piderit said many students think the only academic connection to Catholic identity is an ethical one, but that there is a long and deep Catholic intellectual tradition.

"This tradition includes many Catholic themes which relate to a great variety of academic disciplines," Father Piderit said.

#### **Catholic faculty shortage**

One strategy the two authors recommended was a "Catholic Scholars" program, in which students could elect to take a certain number of courses about the Catholic faith and receive the designation of Catholic Scholars on their diplomas,

"It would be similar to a Catholic studies minor," Morey said, "but the Catholic content would be tailored to a student's major."

Unfortunately, the speakers noted, most Catholic colleges and universities do not have enough faculty members who are well-versed in the Catholic faith to accommodate such a program. To begin to combat this problem, Morey and Father Piderit have started a five-day seminar called "Substantially Catholic" to equip Catholic faculty members from different institutions and disciplines to incorporate more material related to the Catholic intellectual tradition into their courses.

"We're hoping to create networks of people nationally in the disciplines who have the interest, the comfort, and the expertise to engage the Catholic intellectual tradition," Morey said, "and then you'll begin to get more and more of a groundswell which is going to be able to then trickle down."

Dr. Morey and Father Piderit said that their efforts in this area are only the beginning of what they hope will become a larger movement dedicated to integrating the Catholic faith and academia.

"If we're going to have the faculty in large enough numbers to do this effectively, there's going to have to be a number of initiatives," Dr. Morey said.

When asked if he was optimistic about Seattle University's ability to strengthen its Catholic culture, Father Howell was somber but determined.

"It's going to be a real challenge," he said. "This is not an easy thing to do. This is what Catholic universities are struggling with all over the country. It's not unique to Seattle University."